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TRADITIONS OF CHRISTIAN ART.*

BY THE REV. EDWARD L. CUTTS, B.A.

CHAPTER III.

BYZANTINE IVORIES.



HERE is a gap of two centuries—viz. from the sixth to the eighth—in our series of illustrations of the Adoration of the Magi, before we come to the next example. Hitherto all of them have been of the classical age of Art: now we pass, without transition examples, into the Byzantine style of Art. It will be seen at once, by a glance at the engravings in this paper, and a comparison of them with the illustrations of the previous papers, that the Byzantine style differs notably from the Classical. In some respects it is inferior, but in other, and very important, respects we recognise in it a superior spirit. It is inferior in naturalness and grace, for it is stiff and cramped. It is inferior in its anatomical knowledge, and its power of giving characteristic expression; it will be seen by the examples given here that its human forms are disproportionately long, and its faces have a haggard expression. All this is due to the decay of technical skill in the artist. But there is a new spirit making itself felt through all this artistic awkwardness; there is a dignity thrown into the expression of the figures, and a religious tone of feeling, which are new in Art. We recognise at once that the Classical Art, even while engaged on Christian subjects, was pagan, and that the Byzantine Art is Christian. Another characteristic of the latter is its love of magnificent accessories, in contrast with the simplicity of Classical Art. No doubt this is due to the influence of the gorgeous Eastern spirit upon the Western mind, when the two were brought into contact at Constantinople.

The example (Fig. 1) which stands next in chronological order in our series will very probably, at first sight, perplex our readers. Unlike as it is to an example of Byzantine Art, or of any school of Art whatsoever, it is nevertheless an example of a certain phase of Byzantine Art which ought to be illustrated in such a sketch of Art-traditions as this. Rude as it is, there are passages in the design which make it one of value in our series. And lastly, it is of special interest to all Englishmen, for it is of English workmanship, and the earliest English example of our subject.

Mr. Franks, of the British Museum, was fortunate enough to find in the hands of a dealer in curiosities in Paris, and to secure for the Museum, a casket of walrus-ivory of the eighth century, covered with carvings on its sides and lid, and with a Runic inscription running round it; he describes it as "made in Old Northumbria by English hands for English people."

The front of the casket is sculptured in two compartments; one represents the beheading of John the Baptist; the other represents the Adoration of the Magi, and is identified beyond question by an inscription in Runic characters in the upper left hand corner, MAGI. Our woodcut is a representation of this compartment. It is certainly very rude in design, and needs description. It intends to represent the Virgin seated under a canopy on the right, with the Holy Child in her lap. The first Magus kneels and offers a cup; the second and third stand waiting their turn to pay their worship; and their offerings are of different shapes.

This design offers an example of what has been said in the introduction of this series of the degradation of Art at certain periods. Early British coinage affords a very curious illustrative example of the result of successive copying by unintelligent workmen. British princes, after Cæsar's conquest had brought them into contact with the civilisation of the Continent, began at once to adopt it, and among other things began to coin money. One of the later British coins would

offer to the spectator an obverse and reverse covered with marks apparently utterly unmeaning. By arranging a number of the coins in chronological order, it becomes apparent that the British moneyer had taken for his model a Gallic coin, which itself was copied from a Greek coin of Philip, with a laureated bust on the obverse, and a chariot on the reverse. The Briton made a bad copy of it, but one in which the head on the one side and the chariot on the other, though badly drawn, could be easily recognised. Another moneyer copied from this copy, and the design became barely intelligible; and a third copy looks as if the artist (?) had not understood what his model was intended to represent, and had made a certain number of lines almost at random. So in the Irish and Saxon MSS. of a certain period the illustrations, though doubtless originally derived from Byzantine designs, show the most childish inability to draw the human figure—at the same time that the mere ornamentation of the MSS. is a perfect marvel of ingenuity and mechanical skill in the handling of the pen. We have no doubt that this rude carving, whose very intention is not deciphered without some knowledge of the subject, was originally derived from some Byzantine design of no inconsiderable merit.

For another point of special interest in this work of an unskilful Northumbrian artist is, that it gives us a new rendering



Fig. 1.—English Ivory: Eighth Century.

of the subject. We suppose that the English artist was not himself skilful enough to have introduced the new features which we see in his design, and we conclude that he had the design of some Byzantine artist before him, from which he unskilfully copied. But this rude copy is the first representative of a lost original which had introduced two new features into the traditional representation of the Adoration of the Magi. First, the artist has surrounded the Virgin and Child with an indication of architecture which shows that he intended either to place them under a canopy of honour, or to place them in front, or in the doorway, of a building. The second novelty is that he has made the first of the three Magi kneel to present his offering, whereas up to this time the tradition placed them all standing in line; and he has made their gifts different in shape.

The first of these innovations needs a little explanation. A glance through the remainder of the series of illustrations will show us that this architectural accessory frequently occurs in the subsequent treatment of the subject, and will help us to conclude what it is intended to represent. In the next picture (Fig. 2) it looks almost conclusively like a domed canopy. In another (Fig. 7), the Virgin is seated on a chair in front of a building. It is not until we come to the fifteenth century pictures that we make out quite certainly what was intended. There we constantly see the Virgin seated beneath, or in front

* Continued from page 144.

of, a building; generally the edifice is in ruins, and frequently there is a temporary shed erected against the walls of the building, and this is the shelter of the Virgin Mother and the Divine Child. A late version of the literary tradition, to be quoted hereafter in its proper place, will explain very precisely that the ruined building is the Inn of Bethlehem, and the shed is the stable. And so we are able to retrace our steps up the stream of the tradition, and to conclude that the architectural backgrounds of the illustrations in this paper, and the indications of a building given by the arch, or doorway, in this rude design before us, are intended to represent the Inn of Bethlehem, or the stable of the inn.

This inn is so important a feature of the tradition for the next seven centuries, that it is desirable to point out the interest which attaches to it. For the beginning of its history we must go so far back as to the return of David to Jerusalem after the defeat and death of Absalom. When the grateful king desired Barzillai, the wealthy Gileadite who had provisioned his camp, to return with him to Jerusalem, the aged chieftain declined, but sent his son in his place: "Behold thy servant Chimham, let him go over with my lord; and let my lord do to him whatsoever pleaseth him. And the king said, Chimham shall go with me, and whatsoever thou shalt say unto me, that will I do unto him." It appears that what David did was

to give him land of his patrimonial possession at Bethlehem. Upon this land Chimham seems to have built a khan, or caravan-serai, or inn; for by the time of the captivity "the inn of Chimham" near ("close by") Bethlehem had become the recognised point of departure for travellers to Egypt. There can be little doubt that this inn of Chimham was the one in which Joseph and Mary sought shelter when they, with many others, came to Bethlehem in obedience to the decree of Augustus for a census of the Jews,

according to their families. The place of the Nativity was, in the second century, believed to have been a cave. Justin Martyr, writing about the middle of the second century, says that our Lord's birth took place "in a certain cave very close to the village." What we know of the place subsequently is that Hadrian planted a grove of Adonis here; that Constantine, about 350 A.D., sought out, and believed that he had ascertained, the place of the Nativity, and built over it a church, which still remains. Jerome lived in the religious house attached

to Constantine's church of the nativity, and there elaborated the version of the Scriptures which is the great monument of his fame; and writing thence to the Lady Marcella at Rome, he describes the place: "With what words or what utterance," he says, "shall I describe the cave of the Saviour? Lo! in this small cleft of the earth the Founder of the heavens was born; here he was worshipped by the Magi." Chrysostom laments the obliteration of its natural features by Constantine, who had lined the cave with marbles, and covered the manger with silver. "Would that I could behold that manger in which the Lord lay. We Christians, in order to do honour to it, have taken away the clay and replaced it with silver; but to me that which was taken away was the more precious."

Another illustration (Fig. 7) is a good normal example of the Byzantine

school. It is an ivory *plaque* of the ninth century, and of German workmanship, now in the collection of the South Kensington Museum (No. 2,243). The ivory is probably one side of a bookcover; it contains two subjects, the Adoration of the Magi above, and the Presentation below, surrounded and divided by a handsome foliated border; and is executed with considerable skill. It will be seen that the Virgin is seated in a chair on the left, holding the Child in her lap, and Joseph stands

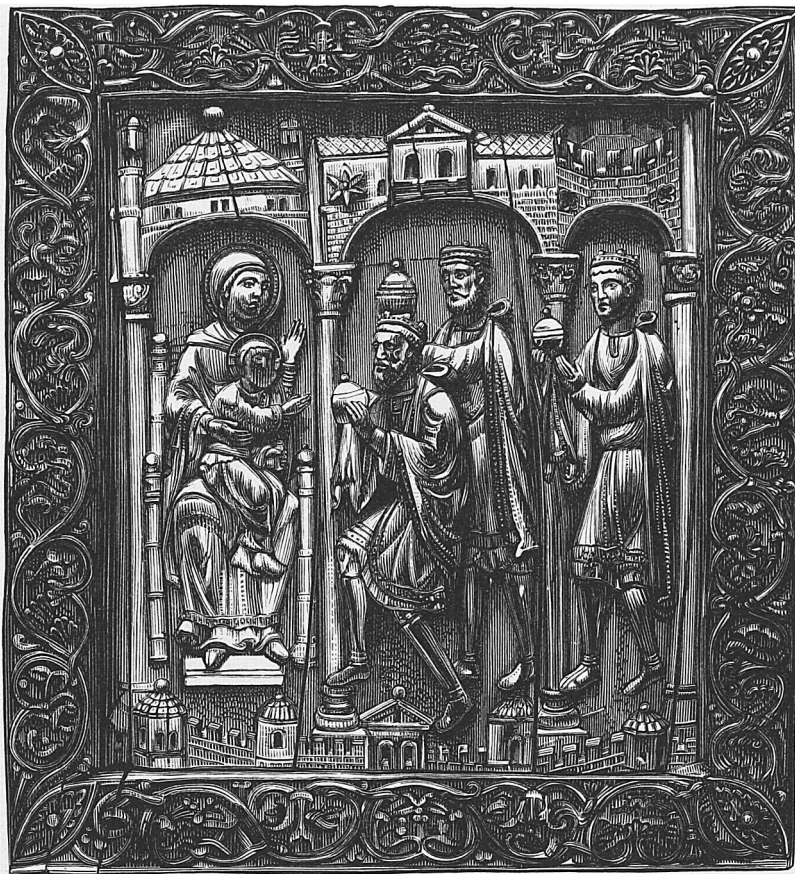


Fig. 2.—Rhenish Ivory Carving: Eleventh Century.



Fig. 3.—Ivory Carving: Ninth Century.

behind: all the sacred persons are nimbed. They are placed on an elevation above the general ground level of the design. Behind is an architectural background, probably representing the city of Bethlehem. The Magi wear the conventional costume of trousers, tunic, cloak, and Phrygian bonnet; but in place of a simple tunic, there appear to be three garments, one over the other; first the ordinary tunic, over that a garment cut to an oval in front, and over that a shorter vest, with a row of buttons or ornaments down the front.* The Magi follow one

another in the usual way, approaching in rapid motion, and with nearly the same attitude. They carry their gifts in circular salvers, their hands are covered with a fold of the cloak—the cloak being fastened by a circular *fibula* at the right shoulder. It seems to have been a fashion at this period, and for long after, to cover the hands when presenting anything to a superior. In another ivory at the South Kensington Museum (No. 2,336), of a secular subject of the eleventh century, is represented a personage in armour, seated, with a footstool—

* Compare it with the costume of the Magi in the mosaics in the previous paper (p. 142). It reminds us also of the way in which the armour and quilted garments

were worn at one period of the fourteenth century, as shown in the monumental brass of Sir John d'Abernoun the younger, at Stoke D'Abernoun, Surrey, and in others.

possibly a king; to him two soldiers are presenting gifts; they bend lowly before him, and present the gifts with hands covered, as above, by the sleeve of the tunic, or by a fold of the upper robe. In the middle ages monks* used to allow the long sleeves of their habit to fall over the hands as a gesture of reverence. Even yet a servant bringing a dish to table has his hands covered by a napkin.

What is more interesting in the design is, that this is the

first time we find the Magi individualised. In the earlier representations they are all alike; they are simply "three wise men." Here it will be seen the first and the third are bearded, while the other is *imberbis*. About this time then, we assume, arose that development of the tradition which assigned a name and character to each of the three, making one an aged man with a grey beard, the second a middle-aged man, and the third a youth. There is another ivory carving of the same subject,



Fig. 4. Frescoes from Caffarella: Eleventh Century.

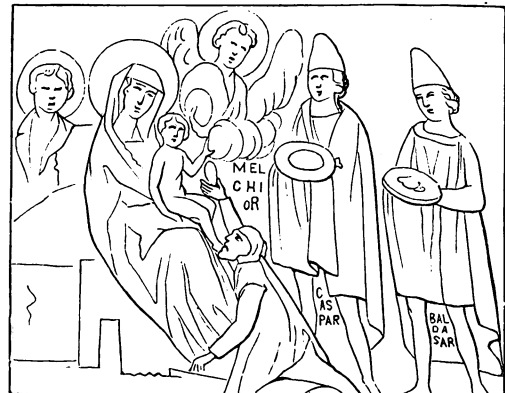


Fig. 5.

of Carolingian style, of the ninth century, in the South Kensington Museum.

The same collection contains three long narrow slips of ivory, each surrounded by a moulded border of classical character, of one of which we give an accurate representation in the accompanying woodcut (Fig. 3). It is divided into two subjects, that on the right we recognise at once as our subject of the Adoration of the Magi; and the simplicity with which it is drawn, and its exact adherence to the earliest type, would incline us to place it early in the series; but it is said by the best judges to be of the ninth century; it is probably a reproduction of some very early type of our subject. The artist might have had before him the picture scratched on the wall of the catacomb (engraved on p. 89, Fig. 3), when he sketched out his design on the slip of ivory before us. The other subject on the slip is one which calls for some remark. The central group clearly enough represents a Nativity; there is the Holy Child in its cradle beneath the shed, and there are the ox and ass of the tradition. On one side sits the Virgin, apparently on a mass of rock, and Joseph on the other side. But who are the three men on the left? One conjecture which suggests itself is, that they may be the shepherds seeing the apparition of the angel Gabriel, or watching the departure of the great multitude of the heavenly host; and then we should have the very natural collocation of the Adoration of the Shep-

herds and of the Magi. But the attitudes of the three men are so exactly those which in other designs we find given to the wise men seeing the star, that we have no hesitation in saying that this Apparition of the Star is the subject intended to be represented.

We may note here a few other representations of the same portion of the history. The treasury of the cathedral at Milan possesses an ivory bookcover, probably of the sixth century, in

which one of the small subjects of the border represents the Magi seeing the star. Two of them are pointing up to it in spirited attitudes, very like those in the woodcut. The South Kensington Museum has a cast of this ivory, and it has been engraved by Mrs. Jameson in her "History of our Lord."

D'Agincourt ("Painting," pl. xcv.) gives engravings of a series of frescoes from the church of St. Urbano, at Caffarella, near Rome, which, he says, were the work of a Greek school of artists settled at Rome in the eleventh century. In one of these frescoes we have the scene of the apparition of the star to the Magi.* The three Magi stand in various atti-

tudes of wonder and joy, gazing up at the star (Fig. 4). They wear the tunic, cloak, and Phrygian bonnet, and carry staves. Their traditional names also are inscribed beside each, in a vertical row of thin well-formed capitals, CASPAR, MELCHIOR, BALDASSAR.

* In Bartholi's dissertation on a sarcophagus found near Ancona, already quoted, there is an engraving, without any reference to it in the text, of a sculpture of the Apparition of the star, which the author says is of still earlier date than the Ravenna sarcophagus, i.e. of at least early fourth-century date.

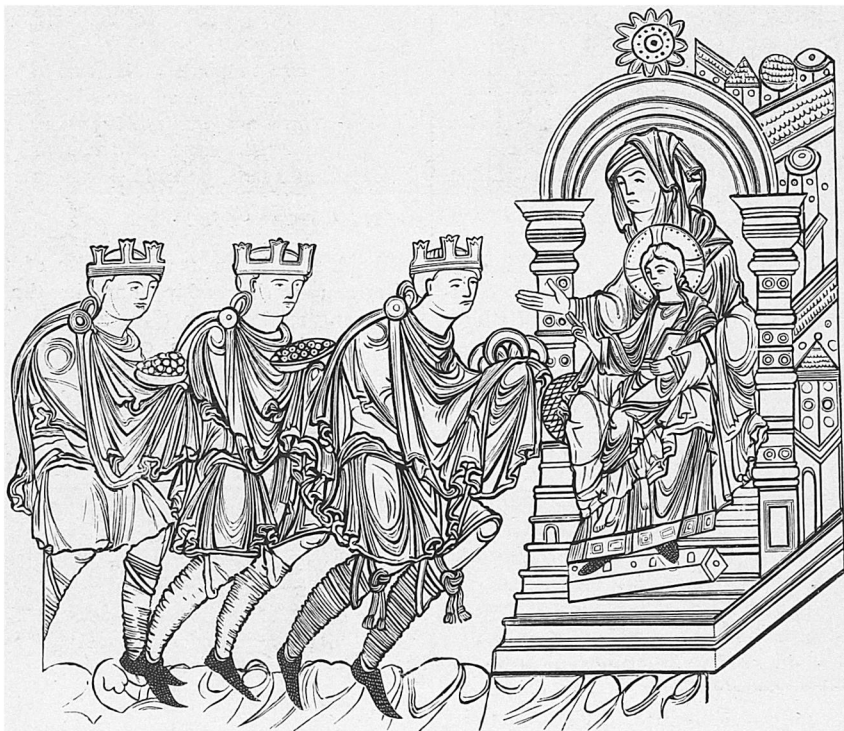


Fig. 6.—Illumination from Saxon MS.: Tenth Century.

* See engraving of a group of Cistercian monks, in "Scenes and Characters of the Middle Ages," p. 17. London: Virtue & Co.

Another fresco of this series gives the Adoration (Fig. 5). The Virgin sits on the left, with the Child in her lap; Joseph stands behind her. These sacred persons have all the circular nimbus. The Magi are habited in tunic, cloak, and Phrygian bonnet, and each has his name inscribed beside him, as in the other fresco. Melchior, the first in order, kneels with bare head, and offers his gift, which is egg-shaped; Caspar and Baldassar stand, each holding the circular salver of the earliest pictures. The names are also inscribed beside the Magi in a rude sculpture over the door of St. Andrea at Pistoja, to which is assigned the date 1166. (D'Agincourt, "Sculpture," pl. xxvii.) Bede is said to have been the first to introduce them into the west.

This is the first time we have actually come upon the names ascribed to the Magi. If we may rely on the genuineness of an entry under the year 70 in the chronicle of Flavius Lucius Dexter, who wrote in the fourth century, and was a friend of St. Jerome's, the names were already known in the fourth century. It is not unlikely that the three bodies which Helena received from different countries as those of the Magi would have had names ascribed to them. What Dexter says A.C. 70 is: "In Arabia Felix civitate Sessaniæ Adrumentorum, martyrum sanctorum trium magorum, Gasparis Balthasaris et Melchioris, qui Christum adoraverunt." The names are not always applied consistently. Most commonly Melchior is the king who first



Fig. 7.—German Ivory Carving: Ninth Century.

offers, and is represented as an aged man, and offers the gold; Balthasar is the middle-aged man, and offers the myrrh; and Gaspar the beardless youth who brings frankincense.

To return to the Caffarella fresco. While everything else is so strictly according to the tradition, there is, however, one interesting novelty here which we shall find also, with modifications, in subsequent pictures. Instead of a star a half-length angel is introduced overhead (Fig. 5).^{*} It is intended to indicate that the star was in fact an angelic messenger who took that shape, or that the dazzling glory of the angel appeared to the Magi like a star.

From very early times the nature of the Epiphany star was a subject of discussion. Chrysostom, in his Homily on Matthew ii. 1, 2, gives his opinion that it was not an ordinary star, and offers reasons which readily occur to any one considering the subject: the course of the star was ultimately from north to south, from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, this is contrary to that of the heavenly bodies, which is from east to west; it shone at mid-day; it appeared and vanished again; it was able to indicate—contrary to the idea of a true star's remoteness—so small a spot as the stable of Bethlehem. He concludes that "this star was not of the ordinary kind, or rather it was not a star at all, at least as it seems to me, but

some invisible power transformed into the appearance of a star. The "History of the Three Kings," by Herman Crombach,^{*} in the first book of the second volume, discusses at length some of the various theories which had been suggested, e.g. whether the star were the Holy Spirit, or an angel in the form of a star; if an angel, whether Gabriel or Michael; or whether Christ himself appeared to the Magi as a star. These various ideas are represented in Art. Mrs. Jameson, in her "Legends of the Madonna," p. 211, gives an engraving from a fresco by Taddeo

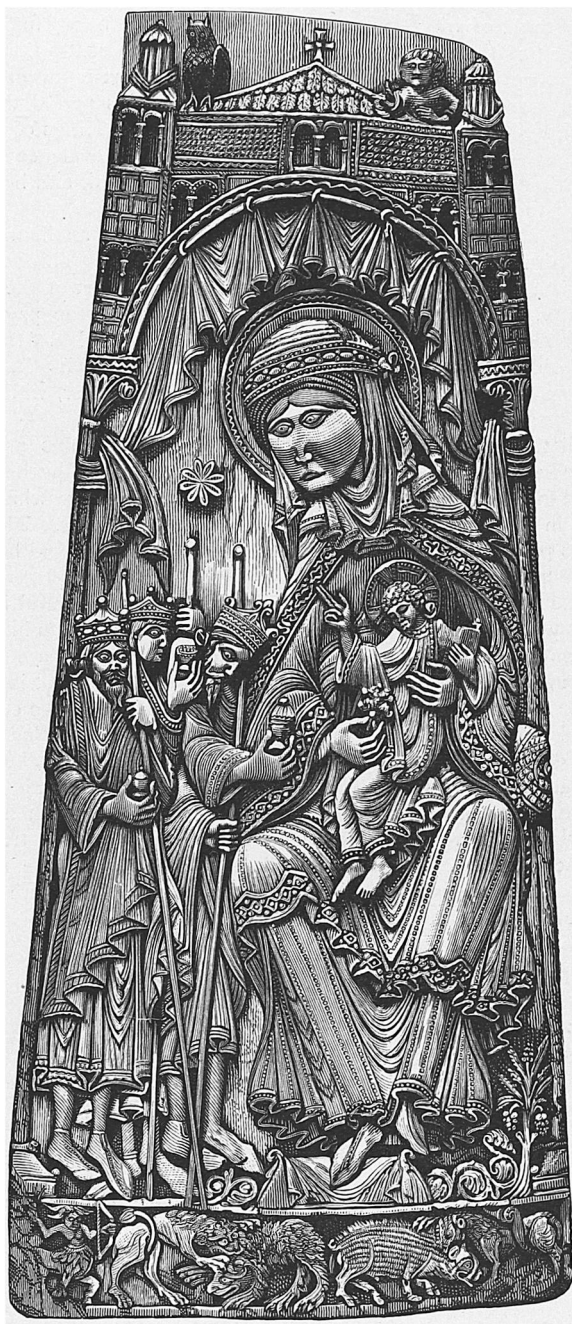


Fig. 8.—Saxon Ivory Carving: Eleventh Century.

Gaddi, in which the star is figured as a radiant child bearing a sceptre (or a cross). Benozzo Gozzoli, in a fresco in the Campo Santo of Pisa, represents angels in the sky together with the cross. In a painting by Garofalo (mentioned in Mrs. Jameson's "Legends of the Madonna") the star is attended by angels bearing the symbols of the Passion. Rubens, in one of his pictures of this subject, similarly places some of the substantial boys

^{*} In a representation of the subject in a Greek MS. of the eleventh century, in the National Library at Munich (engraved in the Ch. Rohault de Fleury's "Evangile," pl. xxiv.) a half-length angel is introduced in the place of the star.

^{*} Primitiæ Gentium. "Sive Historia et Encomium SS. Trium. Regum Majorum Evangelicorum." Auctore R. P. Herman Crombach, e Societate Jesu. Cologne, 1654.

who represent his ideal of angels about the Epiphany star. It will be observed that this is the first time the Magi have appeared as kings. Hitherto they have been treated as Eastern personages, and habited in Eastern costume, of which the Phrygian bonnet was in all ancient Art one of the characteristics. But now, for the first time, the Phrygian bonnet is replaced by the crown. We conclude that it was about this period that such a development of the tradition arose, or came into general acceptance. Their visit had from very early times been universally recognised as a fulfilment of the prophecy, "The kings of Arabia and Saba shall bring gifts." Tertullian twice quotes the passage from the seventy-second Psalm, of which these words form part, as being fulfilled in the visit of the Magi; and Hilary, in the fourth century, actually styles them princes. But the evidence of the Art-representations enables us to say that it was not until about this period that the Magi of the East came to be looked upon as the Kings of Tarsis and the isles, of Arabia and Saba; and the same evidence proves that after this period the idea was generally adopted, and has continued to be accepted to the present day.

The next example of our series (Fig. 6) is from an illuminated English MS. of the Benedictional of St. Ethelwold. This precious MS. is a specimen of the highest style of Saxon Art of the tenth century. The ornamental borders which surround the pages are gorgeous with colours and gold, and the drawing is by the first English artist of the period, for it was executed by Godemann, in the "Scriptorium" of Hyde Abbey, near Winchester, which was famous at that period for its school of artists.

All the characteristic features of the former pictures are here reproduced: the Virgin is seated on the right, with the Holy Child in her lap; his hand is extended with the gesture which was used in solemn benediction, his left hand holds a book. The Virgin is placed here on the summit of a flight of steps, and beneath an arch. At first sight it might be thought she was placed on a throne under a canopy, but there are other architectural indications which lead to the conclusion that it was the artist's intention to represent the Virgin-mother as seated at the door of a building. The infant Jesus has a cruciform nimbus. Joseph is not included in the picture. The Magi come in from the left with the conventional rapid motion. They are habited in a costume which is not very different from the traditional costume of the Magi, but it is in truth the ordinary Saxon costume of the time, the wrinkled hose, the tunic, and short cloak fastened at the shoulder with a large circular brooch. They are crowned, showing that the tradition of the "three kings" was by this time accepted. The round, undecipherable presents of the catacomb picture have here taken more definite shape; and that shape needs a word of explanation.

The foremost king is usually represented as offering gold, sometimes a casket, sometimes (as in Fig. 1) a cup full of coins. We conjecture that the objects here presented by the foremost king are gold bracelets, the common form which presents of value assumed in Saxon times. The other presents are no doubt vessels containing frankincense and myrrh. The exaggerated folds and the flutter of the draperies are characteristic of Saxon Art. The Epiphany star is seen over the arch which encloses the Virgin and Child.

The ivory carvings of the South Kensington collection again supply us with another of our series (Fig. 2), a *plaque* of walrus ivory of Rhenish Byzantine work of the eleventh century (No. 2,236). The ornamental border of the design resembles Carolingian work; the style of the figures is unusually classical. The Virgin is on the left of the design, seated under a dome; the Child is seated in her lap, stretching out his hand to accept the gift. The first king is in the half-kneeling position of which we have seen other examples; the others stand behind. The countenances are individualised; two are bearded, one is not. They wear the tunic and cloak fastened at the shoulder by a great ring-fibula; the star is seen above on the architectural canopy.

Again we find English Art supplying us with a valuable illustration, in the carving of a large bone *plaque* of the eleventh century, in the South Kensington collection (Fig. 8). The design presents some novelty of treatment, and is wrought out with most careful elaboration. The *plaque* is fourteen inches high by about five inches broad, and the design is adapted to these dimensions. The Virgin is seated under a canopy, with architectural enrichments and curtains, and holds a flower in her right hand. The Child is seated on her lap, in the attitude of blessing with his right hand, and holding a book in his left. The three kings are comparatively small figures, crowned, and bearing staves; they all stand in a group, holding covered cups; their habit is the Saxon habit of tunic and cloak, fastened at the shoulder by a ring-fibula; two are bearded, and the third is not. The first king presents his offering, not kneeling, but with an inclination of the body.

This is the first instance in our series of the mode of giving dignity to sacred figures by making them of superhuman size. With our realistic notions of Art it seems puerile; but it was a true æsthetic instinct which made Homer represent the gods of grander height than mortals, and the sculptors carve colossal statues of the kings and gods, like that of Pharaoh at Thebes and of Minerva in her temple at Athens. And there is undeniably a certain dignity given to this Anglo-Saxon artist's work by the colossal dimensions of his principal personages; while value is given to the human figures by their careful elaboration.

(To be continued.)

THE WRITING MASTER.

FROM THE PICTURE IN THE ROYAL GALLERY, DRESDEN.

F. MIERIS, Painter.



OW this picture could ever have acquired the name by which it is known, and which we have therefore retained, seems inexplicable: there is nothing in the intellectual, well-looking, and well-dressed figure to indicate a man who earns his living by teaching the art of penmanship to the youngsters of his time. The books on the table, which is covered with a rich tapestried cloth, and the globe on his right hand, testify to his being a student of some kind; and the open manuscript-book before him suggests that he is simply in the act of mending a pen to enable him to continue his writing. Assuming his occupation to be that of a copyist—and the composition might admit of such construction, though it is far from probable—the proper title would have been 'The Scribe.' But, whatever name the picture bears, the work itself is a remarkably fine specimen of one of those famous Dutch *genre*-painters of the seventeenth century whose productions enrich almost every gallery of repute in Europe where the works of the old masters have a home.

Frans Van Mieris, born in 1635 at Leyden, studied under Ger-

R. WALLIS, Engraver.

hard Dow, and with such an instructor he made so great progress that his works soon gave him a high reputation. Finished with the utmost elaboration of pencilling, this quality never appears to be the result of great labour, but is free and masterly. He is known to have painted numerous portraits, and it is not unlikely that this "writing master" may be one of them, for not a few of his fancy pictures are miniature portraits treated as such. The treatment of this subject is striking and effective: the light, it will be seen, does not enter the apartment through the open archway, but through a window on the left, which is only made apparent by its illuminating the various objects on which it falls. This light is intensified by the introduction of a dark curtain, that helps to give brilliancy to the picture. The natural attitude of the man, the modelling of the head and hands, the easy flow of the lines in the arrangement of his costume, are points of excellence which must commend themselves to all who examine the work carefully. The grace of Frans Mieris's figures, and their entire freedom from vulgarity, constitute not the least of their attractive qualities. This painter died in 1681, at the age of forty-six.